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Mountain Home tests 'plan as you go' at EFX '98

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (ACCNS) - The Air Force is demonstrating an improved readiness capability at Expeditionary Force Experiment 1998.

The 366th Wing, Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, proved the service can use the hours spent en route to a crisis to perform vital wing mission planning activities so an air expeditionary force can strike targets faster.

This capability is called the Expeditionary Operations Center En Route and is an EFX initiative developed by 366th Wing and Air Expeditionary Force Battlelab people.

The portable center is designed to provide intelligence and weather analysis, mission planning, air defense integration, aircraft status monitoring, command post and other functions.

The center allows commanders to use the hours spent in the air on the way to a deployed location to evaluate the latest battlefield data and to plan strike missions that can be accomplished before even landing at the forward area.

The EOC En Route has a "roll-on, roll-off" capability. Built on a standard aircraft pallet, it was loaded onto a specially-equipped 366th Wing KC-135R Stratotanker Sept. 14 at Mountain Home AFB at the beginning of EFX '98. The aircraft was outfitted with a phased array communication antenna so crewmembers can rapidly receive large amounts of data at global distances.

Two B-1B Lancers from the 34th Bomb Squadron took off from base an hour after the tanker departed for Florida, with targets already part of the mission plan.

Three hours into the flight, the Joint Air Operations Center (Rear) at Langley AFB, Va., sent the EOC new targeting information based on new simulated threats.

Mission planners on the tanker reviewed the data and created a new flight plan and then sent the new plan to the bomber crews using various technologies associated with another EFX '98 initiative - the Beyond-Line-of-Sight initiative.

BLOS is made up of four subsystems - Joint Tactical Information Distribution System, Combat Track II, Multisource Tactical System and Airborne Warning and Control System software - and gives bomber crews situational awareness through improved command and control via secure

worldwide communications, color moving maps and in-flight electronic mail.

"We proved the concept and the operators liked what they saw," said EOC En Route sponsor Maj. Tim Apel of the Air Expeditionary Force Battlelab, following the flight.

"The bomber crews changed their targets based on the new information and hit those targets before landing in Florida Monday afternoon," said Apel.

The flight was a learning experience too. The Combat Track II antenna on the tanker isn't centered on the aircraft, so to receive and transmit information, the pilot had to slew (wobble) the aircraft a little - an expected limitation that Apel and other project people will work on in the future.

"Some data came in later than expected," said Apel. "But that's just part of the fog of war."

The "roll-off" capability was demonstrated when the tanker landed here.

"In less than an hour, the EOC pallet had been off-loaded and powered up," said Apel. "In less than three hours the pallet reestablished its communication links - a dramatic improvement over previous AEF deployments where set up measured days. It's now set up in hours - proving the Air Force is more ready than ever to respond to contingency operations anywhere in the world."

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